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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002270

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PLEASE PASS TO NEA A/S JEFFREY FELTMAN AND DAS MICHAEL
CORBIN

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SUBJECT: FM ZEBARI PROVIDES MESSAGE OF REASSURANCE, INSISTS
ATTACKERS HAD OUTSIDE SUPPORT

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Gary Grappo, for reasons 1.
4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: Iraqi FM Hoshiyar Zebari met with foreign Ambassadors August 21 to provide an official reaction to the August 19 bombing of the MFA (and other GOI buildings) and to provide assurances that the MFA would soon be back up and functioning, using auxiliary buildings on the MFA compound. Zebari said that the MFA had clearly BEEN targeted as part of a well-coordinated terrorist assault on "the symbols of state sovereignty," designed to undermine the perceptions of increased security that have developed in the past 18 months. In his view, the bombings had all the hallmarks of a classic al-Qaida operation, although he hinted at several points that it was likely the planners had outside help from one or more countries in the region. FM Zebari predicted that such attacks would escalate in the run-up to January 2010 national elections. Senior Iraqi diplomats who spoke to DCM and Pol M/C afterwards also tried to put up a brave front, but described in chilling detail the appalling scenes of carnage they witnessed in the wake of the attack. End Summary

IRAQI FM REACTS TO ATTACK ON THE MFA

12. (C) FM Hoshiyar Zebari, accompanied by senior Iraqi MFA officials, met with the foreign diplomatic community at the al-Rashid Hotel August 21 to provide assurances that the MFA would soon be back up and functioning. Zebari described the scene at the MFA after the August 19 attack as one of "absolute carnage and destruction" and questioned how anyone present had survived. He termed the series of bombings, aimed at the MFA, the Ministry of Finance, and other GOI institutions, as an "attack on the symbols of state sovereignty," aimed at undermining the "normalization" that has developed and at undercutting GOI claims -- in the run-up to elections -- that it can provide security for ordinary Iraqis. It was the FM's assessment that the MFA was directly targeted, in an effort to halt the increasingly strong relations that Iraq was developing with countries in the region and beyond.

13. (C) Zebari offered an official count of casualties: 32 fatalities and 60 injured. (Note: We have heard from some contacts that the GOI is making an effort to massage downwards the casualty count, as a way of diminishing some of the political impact of the attacks and shoring up Iraqis' sense that the government has the situation under control. Iraqi press reported 82 as the final death toll in all the August 19 Baghdad attacks.) The FM noted that MFA officials had reviewed repeatedly on August 20 security film footage of the minutes before the attack, which was helping fill in some of the details. According to Zebari, there had been no security breach at the MFA itself. The truck had pulled up as close as possible to the main gate outside the Ministry and then detonated. Unfortunately, a security checkpoint

that might have intercepted the vehicle had been removed on official GOI orders only days before, according to Zebari.

BLAMES AL-QAIDA, WITH OUTSIDE SUPPORT

¶4. (C) Zebari described the attack as "an archetypal al-Qaida operation," with a well coordinated series of spectacular attacks designed to inflict maximum damage. In his view, the attackers must have had extensive support, in terms of intelligence, logistics, expertise on -- and supply of -- the high-grade explosives, which he described as nearly Qof -- the high-grade explosives, which he described as nearly "two tons of C-4." In both his opening remarks and in response to questions, FM Zebari hinted broadly -- without naming specific countries -- that outside elements in the region had provided assistance. When pressed to name which country or countries might have been involved, he noted again the huge amount of high-grade explosives provided and also mentioned that the help came from people in the region who opposed the entire democratic process in Iraq. He added somewhat cryptically that there may have been a convergence of interests and capabilities among a few countries in the region.

¶5. (C) Addressing the broader political and security climate, Zebari noted that in the months leading up to the attacks, the government had been largely paralyzed, unable to move on major political initiatives like constitutional reform and national reconciliation. This paralysis had impact on the security situation, said Zebari. (Note: Press accounts report that 11 senior Iraqi security officers have been arrested in the wake of what has been described as

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serious security lapses.) FM Zebari also pointed to the GOI decision to move forward with normalization aspects and remove certain security barriers and checkpoints. He added that the government would need to re-think this move.

MFA SETTING UP SHOP NEARBY

¶6. (C) According to other Iraqi diplomats, the MFA building is "destroyed" and unusable. Zebari said the MFA would refurbish two smaller buildings on the MFA compound, the Foreign Service Institute and a building used by the Office of Protocol, to start up operations again. Qais al-Kubaisi, special assistant to Zebari, told poloff that the two buildings would only house about 50 of the over 500 employees of the Ministry. For the time being, MFA employees have been instructed to stay home. Kubaisi also noted that the Ministry for the moment has completely lost its communications capability and has lost contact with its diplomatic missions abroad.

THE HUMAN TOLL

¶7. (C) Iraqi diplomats who spoke to DCM and Pol M/C afterwards tried to put up a brave front, but described in chilling, often grisly detail the horrifying scenes of carnage and suffering they witnessed in the moments after the attack. Zebari's Chief of Staff Srood Najib, visibly restraining himself, detailed how the attack had wiped out some the brightest young diplomats in the MFA, including half of the Americas Division and half of the group of young diplomats who had gone to the United States for special training. He recounted going from office to office, helping the injured and discovering scores of dead colleagues. Both he and DFM Labid Abbawi noted that half the fatalities had been women, including two pregnant. Abbawi also made a much sharper accusation of responsibility than his minister had, describing the attack as "their answer to PM Maliki's visit to Damascus" the day before, hinting that in his personal view, Baathist elements with Syrian support had been

involved.

IRAQIS' SENSE OF SECURITY TARGETED

¶18. (C) One non-MFA contact pointed to the powerful psychological impact the bombings had had, saying they had wiped out 18 months of increased security and with it the perception that the GOI could provide security for ordinary Iraqis. An expatriate offering technical assistance to the GOI reported Iraqis telling him that "We're back to square one, in terms of security." A rumor circulated two days after the attack that the government had decided to postpone the national parliamentary elections, set for January 16, ¶2010. Contacts working with the Iraqi Electoral Commission (IHEC) have said that IHEC was re-examining its security procedures and looking for serious upgrades, but was proceeding with a planned August 22 Voter Registration Update and had given no indication that the date for national elections was being revisited.

¶19. (C) COMMENT: This devastating series of bombings, directly targeting the GOI and PM Maliki's platform of security, will continue to reverberate and will likely exact its intended psychological toll by undermining Iraqis' perception -- and of those in the region and beyond -- of Iraq's security and stability, and shaking Iraqi confidence in the Iraqi political process. The Maliki government will have to redouble its efforts on multiple fronts, including stepped up security coordination, intelligence sharing, and public diplomacy, to reaffirm that perception of security and Qpublic diplomacy, to reaffirm that perception of security and assure Iraqis and those observing from the outside, that the August 19 bombings are a setback, nothing more.
HILL